



# Dakṣiṇā Kosālā

a Rich Centre  
of Early  
Śaivism

Natasja Bosma

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Image on cover: Small *liṅga* outside the Kuleśvara temple at Raipur, Chhattisgarh; photo N. Bosma 2009.

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# Introduction

## The Case of Dakṣiṇa Kosala

Recent studies into the history of Śaivism have made it evident that the beginning of India's early medieval period (ca. 400–900 CE) was a crucial time in the genesis and development of the religious tradition revolving around the god Śiva. In particular the sixth and seventh centuries were formative for the religion's success; new forms of Śaivism developed that were open to all levels of society, thus expanding beyond the confines of a sectarian movement that was restricted to brahmin celibate ascetics only. Instead of wandering outside the prevailing brahmanical socio-religious order based on caste and discipline (*varṇāśramadharmah*), these new forms of Śaivism incorporated the brahmanical convention and required initiates to maintain their social state at the time of their initiation. In addition, Śaiva propagators developed strong ties to royal houses and grew to be successful at establishing a range of religious institutions throughout the Indianized world, thus facilitating Śaivism to rise and develop into one of the most prominent religious traditions in the religio-political landscape of early medieval India.<sup>1</sup>

The popularization of Śaiva religion also triggered the production of a large quantity and variety of texts in which the theology, mythology, philosophy and ritual codes of both the lay devotion to Śiva as well as the various branches of initiatory Śaivism were recorded.<sup>2</sup> In the last decades, many manuscripts of these texts have come to light, providing scholars with the means to explore the network of Śaiva schools that came into existence in the course of time.<sup>3</sup> An important example of such a religious scripture is the original *Skandapurāṇa*, of which the edition and the historical inquiry

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<sup>1</sup>These developments were explored, recorded and analyzed in Sanderson's seminal article 'The Śaiva Age — The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period'. SANDERSON 2009. Other articles relevant to this subject are SANDERSON 2004; SANDERSON 2010; SANDERSON 2013a, pp. 222–224 and SANDERSON *forthcoming*.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. SANDERSON 2014 for an extensive overview of the main divisions of Śaiva literature and 'their interlocking religious contexts'.

<sup>3</sup>These literary sources have revealed that (initiatory) Śaivism can be divided into two primary divisions, referred to as the Atimārga and the Mantramārga based on the sources of the latter. The dichotomy between the two is roughly reflected by the sixth-seventh



into its composition and spread has been an ongoing project by a team of scholars since the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The oldest surviving recension of the *Skandapurāṇa* has been transmitted in Nepalese palm-leaf manuscripts (S1–4), the earliest of which is dated to 810/811 CE. Together with two more recent recensions, the *Revākhaṇḍa* (R) and *Ambikākhaṇḍa* (A), this so-called ‘Nepalese recension’ has been the main source for the text’s critical edition. Both Bakker and Yokochi agree, however, that the inception of the text was in India, more specifically in the north of India, and in a Pāśupata context. Based on an analysis of the complicated evolution and transmission of these S, R and A recensions, Yokochi ascribes the first redaction of the *Skandapurāṇa* to the period 550–650 CE, after which it was transmitted into

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century transition sketched above. The purely ascetic Atimārga (Path Outside of the World) developed from the second century CE onwards and comprised the systems of the Pāñcārthika Pāśupatas (i), the Lākulas/Kālamukhas (ii) and the Somasiddhāntins/Kāpālikas (iii). The newer Mantramārga (Tantric Śaivism), open to men and women of all four castes and both active and passive initiates, emerged from the Atimārga from the fifth century CE onwards; its major system was the Siddhānta (i), centered on Śiva himself, whereas the esoteric non-Saiddhāntika systems (ii) were concerned with the worship of ferocious female deities (Vidyāpīṭha) or Bhairava (Mantrapīṭha). The Mantramārga is called the Path of Mantras because, compared to the other Śaiva systems, Mantras are used in a far more comprehensive way; they are not only used to empower rituals and meditation, but they are propitiated as the embodiment of deities themselves (*mantradevatāḥ*) for the sake of supernatural effects. A third division or ‘Path’, named the Kulamārga, developed from the ninth century onwards and is likely based on the second and third system of the Atimārga. SANDERSON 1988; SANDERSON 2006a; SANDERSON 2009, pp. 45–53; SANDERSON 2013a, pp. 211–215; SANDERSON 2014 and SANDERSON *forthcoming*, pp. 1–3. On the Kālamukhas (Lākulas) and Kāpālikas (Somasiddhāntins) specifically, cf. LORENZEN 1972

<sup>4</sup>The *Skandapurāṇa* Project was initiated by Rob Adriaensen, Hans Bakker and Harunaga Isaacson in the early 1990s. At the time, all three were connected to the Institute of Indian Studies of the University of Groningen. Over the years, various scholars from different parts of the world took part in the project, but it remained headquartered in the Groningen Institute under the direction of Hans Bakker until the summer of 2013. From then on, the project has been continued by longtime members Peter Bisschop (Leiden University) and Yuko Yokochi (Kyoto University). At the moment, about one third of the text (*Adhyāyas* 1–69 and 167) has been critically edited and published: Volume I (*Adhyāyas* 1–25): ADRIAENSEN, BAKKER & ISAACSON 1998; Volume IIa (*Adhyāyas* 26–31.14, i.e. the Vārāṇasī Cycle): BAKKER & ISAACSON 2004; Volume IIb (*Adhyāyas* 31–52, i.e. the Vāhana and Naraka Cycles): BAKKER, BISSCHOP & YOKOCHI 2014; Volume III (*Adhyāyas* 34.1–61, 53–69, i.e. the Vindhyaśāsinī Cycle): YOKOCHI 2013 and *Adhyāya* 167: BISSCHOP 2006. The text’s *editio princeps* was edited by Kṛṣṇaprasāda Bhaṭṭarāi (SP<sub>Bh</sub>) in BHAṬṬARĀI 1988.

various hyparchetypes.<sup>5</sup> The study of the *Skandapurāṇa* has had a profound influence on the research of the religious developments described above, for it speaks to the early phase of the institutionalization of Śaivism and it contains the earliest extant origination myth of the Pāśupata tradition, the precursor of various forms of Tantric Śaivism. The text celebrates the geographic spread of the Pāśupata movement over northern India from its point of origin in south Gujarat (second century CE), by means of a sequence of Māhātmyas, in which different myths are related to specific geographic locations, thus embedding the tradition into the religious landscape.<sup>6</sup>

The historical inquiry into the place of the *Skandapurāṇa* in relation to the development and formation of Pāśupata Śaivism has been a reoccurring theme in the work of Hans Bakker, culminating in his recent *The World of the Skandapurāṇa: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries* (2014). This comprehensive work was the end result of the research project *A Historical Enquiry Concerning the Composition and Spread of the Skandapurāṇa* by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), which aimed to study the text in the context of contemporary religious and cultural developments in northern India. A sub-strand of the research considered the possible connection between the *Skandapurāṇa* and a special area in central India called Dakṣiṇa Kosala. There is no reference to this area in the text, but, as we will see in the chapters to come, a large number of antiquities have been recovered from Dakṣiṇa Kosala, which gave reason to believe that Śaivism flourished there at an early stage. This triggered the question as to how Śaivism came to develop in the area and whether the *Skandapurāṇa* played a role in that development. Therefore, taking the religious developments mentioned thus far as background, this book will present the case of Dakṣiṇa Kosala.

Ancient Dakṣiṇa Kosala roughly corresponds to the modern state of Chhattisgarh, plus the districts of Sambalpur, Balangir and Kalahandi of Odisha (formerly Orissa). This region is often characterized as ‘marginal’ and, even today, Chhattisgarh – one of the fastest developing states of India – is sometimes considered to be somewhat ‘backward’, due to the fact that part of the state is still a tribal area. But in fact, epigraphical evidence, supported by archaeological remains, has shown that by the turn of the seventh cen-

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<sup>5</sup>YOKOCHI 2013, pp. 33–66. Cf. BAKKER 2014a, pp. 137–151 and BISSCHOP 2006, p. 14 and p. 200.

<sup>6</sup>BAKKER 2014a, pp. 10–11 and BISSCHOP 2006, pp. 3–19

ture, Dakṣiṇa Kosala was already a rich centre of early Śaivism. At that time, the region was under the control of the Pāṇḍava king Śivagupta of Śrīpura (the modern village of Sirpur). Śivagupta had a very long reign of at least fifty-seven regnal years, and from his records it becomes clear that this king was a great patron of religion, and of Śaivism in particular. In the context of this setting, the twofold objective of the present research was to see what fostered the rise of Śaivism in Dakṣiṇa Kosala and whether there was any relation to the *Skandapurāṇa*. The associated research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What were the historical and social circumstances that made Dakṣiṇa Kosala, and in particular Sirpur, such a fertile breeding ground for Śaivism to develop?
2. Was the *Skandapurāṇa* part of the the religious life in Dakṣiṇa Kosala?

An answer to these questions would not only shed light on the religious processes at work in Dakṣiṇa Kosala, but would also touch upon the interplay of political, social, economic and geographical factors.

The research focuses on two major sources. The starting point was the great collection of copper-plate charters and stone inscriptions issued by kings of Dakṣiṇa Kosala from the end of the fifth until the middle of the seventh century CE. Most of these records are available in edition, and they contain valuable information about the political and religious situation at the time of issue, for their common purpose is to record donations of land and money by the person in charge or his relatives to temples, temple-gods, brahmins and other religious people and institutions.<sup>7</sup> The second source consists of the many archaeological remains of ancient Dakṣiṇa Kosala — some (very) recently excavated — that are preserved today in Chhattisgarh: at the original site, in private possession, in several site museums and in the Mahant Ghasidas Memorial Museum in the capital city of Raipur. To survey these archaeological materials, three fieldwork trips to Chhattisgarh were carried out in the periods December 2006, December 2008–January 2009 and December 2012. During these fieldwork trips, I visited all the places where

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<sup>7</sup>The whole collection of copper-plate charters and stone inscriptions are listed, as far as possible chronologically, in Appendix 1, with a brief description of their most important details (provenance, script, issuing king, date, subject, author, engraver) and references to the articles and books in which they are published. The records are given a ‘Dakṣiṇa Kosala number’ (Dk), which will be used in the footnotes to refer to the particular inscriptions.

early remains have been found — Tāla, Malhār, Sisadevarī, Sirpur, Āraṅg, Rājīm, Turturiā, Sardha, Garhśivani, Palāri, Dhobinī, Kharod and Aḍbhār — to study the remains and to collect a database of pictures to analyze. Of the material collected in this way, only the findings related to Śaivism will be discussed.

The resulting information and findings are discussed in four chapters, in which the two sources are kept separate. The first two chapters are based on the epigraphical material, and they provide an outline of the political and religious setting in which Śaivism came to flourish in Dakṣiṇa Kosala. In the next two chapters, the focus is turned to the archaeological material, to support the findings in the previous chapters. Chapter three gives an overview of the most relevant archaeological sites in Chhattisgarh, whereas the fourth chapter zooms in on the doorway iconography of the preserved Śiva temples. At the end, both threads of research are gathered together in the conclusion, in which an answer is formulated to the central research questions mentioned above. The book is closed by two appendices, namely: Appendix 1 listing the epigraphical records and Appendix 2 containing the edition of an unpublished stray copper plate.

Before expressing my gratitude to the many people who have helped me during the years of my research and the years of writing this book, I feel obliged to offer a word of caution on the excavation site of Sirpur. Being the ancient capital of Dakṣiṇa Kosala, Sirpur is by far the largest and most important excavation site in Chhattisgarh, but I also consider Sirpur to be a contaminated site that should be considered cautiously. As to be expected, many structural remains have been unearthed, presumably dating to the reign of king Śivagupta. While being excavated, these remains were rebuilt with original materials, but the authenticity of the reconstructions cannot be warranted, for the excavation reports mainly report on the remains after their reconstruction. The sculptural material has been removed from its original location to several site museums and particularly the somewhat later constructions are built with parts that do not match. This will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter of this book.

It has been a long journey from the moment I first heard of an area named Dakṣiṇa Kosala to the final preparations of this book, and in the course of that journey I have been helped by many people. Therefore, to conclude this introduction, I wish to express my gratitude to a number of them. First of all, I would never have thought about a project like this one without the inspiration of Professor Hans Bakker as my teacher and

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supervisor. He first introduced me to the world of Indian art and religion and sparked my interest in the field of iconography, and it was he who first suggested that I take up Dakṣiṇa Kosala as the subject of my thesis. My appreciation also goes to the participants in the *Skandapurāṇa* project, who have motivated me during our annual August meetings at the Institute of Indian Studies. A special thanks goes to Frans Janssen, who was willing to accompany me during my 2008 research trip to Chhattisgarh. It was great having someone with his experience and knowledge by my side to show me around. I wish to thank the people who have helped me in India for their time and hospitality, in particular Professor L. S. Nigam, Mr. G. L. Raikwar and Mr. R. K. Singh in Raipur, Mr. G. Singh Thakur and Mr. S. Pandey in Malhār and Mr. A. K. Sharma in Sirpur. I am grateful to Professor Alexis Sanderson and Professor Yuko Yokochi for proofreading (parts of) the book and giving very useful remarks and suggestions concerning the contents. And finally I wish to mention my husband, Johan Sloot, who supported me in every step of the process and even accompanied me during my final fieldwork trip to meet my Indian friends and to see all the beautiful places that are part of this dissertation. Johan, without you this research would have been a lonely adventure!



*Plate I.1: Excavation site of Tālā*

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